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1. We Are the World

America's Dominance in Global Pop Culture

Of all the American pop-cultural products that are being consumed around the world, ranging from Hollywood films and Coca-Cola to television soap operas and hip-hop, the 1985 pop song "We Are the World" by USA for Africa is one of the most blatant examples of America's dominance in global pop culture. A relatively simple charity pop song recorded by a group of American stars named the United Support of Artists (USA) can make such abstract notions as Americanization and globalization concrete. "There are people dying," sings Stevie Wonder, without a doubt genuinely concerned about the starving Ethiopians in Africa. However, the American stars are there to provide relief with optimism and good cheer. "We Are the World" is not merely a charity pop record to raise western awareness of the Ethiopian famine and to collect money for aid, but is most of all a showcase of American superstars who function as ideological ambassadors of American values such as freedom and democracy within a free market economy, using a language that is strikingly similar to the rhetoric of Pepsi and Coca-Cola commercials. In this way, "We Are the World" can be perceived as part of "an engine of global hegemony," presenting these American national values of democracy, freedom, and open exchange of goods and services as universal.[1]

The complexities of Americanization and globalization obviously cannot be covered completely by merely focusing on a singular pop song, notably one that was recorded and released almost thirty years ago. Nevertheless, "We Are the World" does show how processes of Americanization and globalization work through pop culture, in this case wrapping a potentially provocative message about dying people in Africa in sheer pleasure. I clearly remember my personal experience of enjoying the song as a teenager, back in 1985. Although I was not particularly thrilled by the music (as a pop song, "We Are the World" seems rather contrived and tepid, easily reduced to elevator

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music), I was enthralled by the combined star power of all those great American pop stars coming together to sing a song and save the world. The music video added to this pleasure, showing the stars performing together in the recording studio so unselfishly, all patiently waiting their turn to sing their lines. My teenage experience is similar to the one of Greil Marcus's daughter, who, at that time, explained to her father how "We Are the World" gave her and her teenage friends so much pleasure: "The music washes over you and makes you feel good – and it's a game too, trying to identify each singer then checking against the video."[2] The metaphor of American pop culture as a wave that "washes over you and makes you feel good" is an oft-used one, not only applied to pop music like "We Are the World," but also to the escapist quality of Hollywood cinema and television, to the childlike innocence as embodied by Disney, and to the refreshing taste of Coca-Cola.

As a product of the global pop music industry with its multinational forms of distribution and communication technologies, "We Are the World" fits within a discourse of globalization that emphasizes homogeneity and universalism. In the assumed free global market, borders are disappearing and identities become hybrid, as "we" are all consumers buying the same products. Yet, in addition to its universal and global character, "We Are the World" is also part of an image of "America" which is broadcast around the world. I will discuss "We Are the World" as an example of Americanization and globalization, without suggesting that my analysis demonstrates the only possible way in which these processes can work. Instead, I want to show, by a subjective reading of one specific case study, how the combination of pleasure, pop stardom, and the commercial rhetoric of mass advertising ends up promoting an American conception of the world, thereby presenting the values of democracy, individual freedom, and choice through consumerism as seemingly universal and global ones.

The World as One Great Big American Family

Produced by Quincy Jones and written by pop stars Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie, "We Are the World" is the American follow-up to the British Band Aid charity hit single "Do They Know It's Christmas? (Feed the World)," released in December 1984 to raise money to fight the famine in Ethiopia. On January 28, 1985, right after the taping of the annual American Music Awards, a wide range of American pop stars, including Stevie Wonder, Bruce Springsteen, Tina Turner, Cyndi Lauper, Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson, Billy Joel, Diana Ross, and Ray Charles, joined Jackson and Richie at the Los Angeles A&M Recording

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Studios to spread a semi-religious message of human universalism. "We are all a part of God's great big family," sings Turner, followed by Joel who adds, "and the truth, you know, love is all we need." With the exception of Wonder's line about people dying, there is no explicit reference to the political reality of African famine and poverty, let alone to its causes or possible solutions. Also, no images of the African famine are included in the music video, only the smiling faces of the American pop stars recording their message in the studio, singing about the promise of a better future, as "we" are all God's children sharing one world as a family.

Band Aid's "Do They Know It's Christmas?" differs from USA for Africa's "We Are the World" in two significant ways. First, in its lyrics, written by Band Aid's initiator Bob Geldof (music by Midge Ure, produced by Trevor Horn), "Do They Know It's Christmas?" makes a strong distinction between "us" celebrating Christmas in "our world of plenty," while "they" in "a world outside your window" are starving, suggesting that "we" should be grateful that the African tragedy is happening to "them" rather than to "us." As a result, the lyrics seem to invite a cynical interpretation, particularly when U2's Bono cries out "well tonight, thank God it's them instead of you," followed by Paul Young's call to raise "our" glasses for "everyone," including for "them, underneath that burning sun." In this way, the message of "Do They Know It's Christmas?" seems more realistic – aware of the geopolitical reality that divides the world in rich and poor sections – than USA for Africa's one-world human universalism. Although the seriousness of Band Aid's message is undermined by the music video, which shows the white male singers and musicians frolicking around in the recording studio, the difference between the two songs remains telling: Band Aid's almost cynical recognition of the discrepancy between "us" and "them," thereby emphasizing global inequality, versus USA for Africa's rather naïve celebration of "we" as part of one world, propagating the notion that "we" are all the same.

Second, although women and non-white men are featured in the chorus, all solos of "Do They Know It's Christmas?" are sung by white men: Paul Young, Boy George, Wham!'s George Michael, Duran Duran's Simon Le Bon, Sting, Spandau Ballet's Tony Hadley, and U2's Bono. The women, consisting of the white girl group Bananarama and the black (American) singer Jody Watley, and the men of color, consisting of three members of the black (American) band Kool & the Gang, do not appear until more than halfway through the song, which is emphasized by the music video, showing their arrival at the studio right after the white men have finished recording their solos. USA for Africa, on the contrary, is a true celebration of American multiculturalism. Old and young, male and female, black and white, all are included with their

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specific musical genres, ranging from soul, country, and gospel, to folk, pop, and rock. "We Are the World" combines these different genres quite nicely by pairing off African-American rocker Tina Turner with white piano player Billy Joel, white folksinger Paul Simon with white country star Kenny Rogers, white working-class hero Bruce Springsteen with African-American Motown star Stevie Wonder, and African-American soul singer Dionne Warwick with white country legend Willie Nelson. USA for Africa fits the conventional multicultural image of "America" as a mirror of the world, where people of all nations come together as one to pursue their common American Dream. That this group of diverse yet united artists is named the United Support of Artists is telling, as the name obviously refers to the nation-state USA.

To overemphasize the differences between Band Aid's "Do They Know It's Christmas?" and USA for Africa's "We Are the World" is tempting, as it reinforces conventional distinctions between Europe and America, including, in this case, European art/authorship versus American entertainment and European realism versus American optimism. The seemingly unrehearsed recording of the Band Aid music video gives the impression that the British white male pop singers just happened to show up in the studio to help out their buddy Bob Geldof with his initiative to "do something good" for Africa. The USA for Africa music video, on the contrary, is a slick and professional Hollywood production, recorded at the center of American entertainment and featuring America's greatest pop stars. This distinction is also reflected by the lyrics of the pop songs. As stated above, "Do They Know It's Christmas?" is a rather bleak and cynical depiction of the geopolitical state of affairs that, according to the promotional media coverage during the single's initial release, was Bob Geldof's (arguably simple yet genuine) personal view of the situation. In stark contrast to Band Aid's message, "We Are the World" is an optimistic fantasy of a multicultural world that promises a happy ending to an African tragedy, which is emphasized by the fact that USA for Africa is the product of a collective effort, uniting a group of multiethnic artists, rather than the project of one white male rock singer.

Yet ultimately, the similarities between Band Aid's "Do They Know It's Christmas?" and USA for Africa's "We Are the World" are far more striking than the differences. Both pop songs use well-known pop stars to present a melodic and rather plain message about famine and poverty in Africa in an attempt to raise awareness and money. Both songs make explicit references to God, which, particularly in the case of "Do They Know It's Christmas?," are clearly based on Christianity. Most importantly, both singles are consumer products, turning the act of giving to charity into another form of consumption. The Band Aid and USA for Africa music videos, both solely consisting of

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pop star images, function as commercials to sell the charity singles, using the surplus value of celebrity (perhaps even more than the musical talent of the pop stars) to attract a wide global audience. Recognizing not only the differences but also the similarities is significant for two reasons. First, as Thomas Elsaesser argues, the distinction between Europe and America in global pop production is used to maintain the status quo and keep the non-western world out of the equation. Writing about the distinction between Hollywood and European cinema, Elsaesser states, "this usually binary relation of buried antagonisms and resentment actually functions not only as a two-way-traffic, but acts as an asymmetrical dynamic of exchange, whose purpose it is to stabilize the system by making both sides benefit from each other, paradoxically by making-believe that their regular and ritual stand-offs are based on incompatible antagonisms."[3] Applied to the global music industry that produced Band Aid and USA for Africa, this means that only looking at the distinctions between the European and the American charity single tends to mystify the way the two singles are interrelated as part of the same music industry. Second, rather than being opposites, "We Are the World" can be seen as a commercially improved version of "Do They Know It's Christmas?," better equipped to reach a worldwide audience. Although both charity singles became global hit songs, the slick and professional production, its optimistic and cheerful message of human universalism, and the presence of American superstars, made USA for Africa's "We Are the World" the generic archetype, setting the standard for other charity singles to follow.

After the success of Band Aid and USA for Africa, artists from different countries around the world recorded their own charity singles to raise money for Ethiopia, including, to name just a few, the Canadian Northern Lights with "Tears Are Not Enough," the German Band für Ethiopia with "Nackt Im Wind" ("Naked in the Wind"), the Belgian "Leven Zonder Honger" ("Life without Hunger"), the French Chanteurs Sans Frontières with "Ethiopie," the Finnish Apua! Orkersteri with "Maksamme Velkaa" ("We Are Paying the Debt"), the Dutch "Samen" ("Together"), the Yugoslavian Yu Rock Misija with "Za Milion Godina" ("For a Million Years"), the Australian Australia Too with "The Garden," and the Latin American Hermanos with "Cantaré Cantarás" ("I Will Sing, You Will Sing"). While there are national and regional variations between these different songs, with language being the most obvious one, their generic similarity reveals a global homogeneity, suggesting that the audiovisual conventions of Band Aid and USA for Africa have become dominant in this new global pop genre. As Simon Frith notes, these multinational charity singles share a "global pop sound," consisting of "an unobtrusive but determined rock beat, soul-inflected sincere vocals, and a balladic chorus line to pluck the heart

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strings."[4] The dominance of USA for Africa (and, to a lesser extent, Band Aid) is thus partially based on its being the global generic archetype that is being imitated on national and regional levels, resulting in both global homogeneity (the songs and music videos all sound and look the same) and global heterogeneity (all songs and music videos contain specific national and regional characteristics).[5] However, these global-sounding charity singles, national and regional variations on USA for Africa, do not reach beyond their geographical boundaries, because, in addition to language barriers, their appeal is predominantly based on the use of local rather than global pop stars. "We Are the World" (and, again to a lesser extent, "Do They Know It's Christmas?"), on the contrary, can reach a worldwide audience, suggesting that USA for Africa has become dominant on a global level not only by providing a generic example as a lingua franca, but also by effectively transcending its national boundaries, using its global pop stars to present a universal message.

The Pop Star Myth and the American Dream

As argued before, the strength of USA for Africa's "We Are the World" is based on its combined star power, presenting an image of American multiculturalism by featuring multiethnic pop stars ranging from music legends such as Ray Charles and Bob Dylan to (at that time) young pop singers such as James Ingram and Huey Lewis. However, two American stars stand out, both vocally on the record as well as visually in the music video: Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen. In 1985, Jackson and Springsteen were both at the commercial and popular peak of their singing careers. Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, released in December 1982, had just become the bestselling album of all time, whereas the music videos of the album's hit singles, "Billie Jean," "Beat It," and "Thriller," broke the racial barrier of the then-newly established MTV music television channel.[6] In addition, his 1983 performance of the moonwalk on American national television, broadcast worldwide, skyrocketed Jackson into global mega-stardom.[7] Not yet tainted by the controversies that destroyed his career in later years (as will be discussed in chapter six), Michael Jackson became the living example that, by the 1980s, African Americans could also make their American Dream come true. Around the same time, in June 1984, Bruce Springsteen released his bestselling album *Born in the USA*, featuring seven hit singles, including "Dancing in the Dark," "Born in the USA," "Glory Days," and "I'm on Fire." While already a critically acclaimed recording artist since the mid-1970s, the commercial success of *Born in the USA* turned Springsteen into a global rock star. His image, music, and popularity fit the renewed investment

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in white American working-class masculinity, that, in the early 1980s, became embodied by, among others, President Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Rambo, the latter being the Hollywood action hero played by Sylvester Stallone.[8] In significantly different ways, the star images of Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen both present an image of America, which came together in the USA for Africa charity single and music video. However, before analyzing the way in which these two star images embody an imagined America, I first will discuss how stars can be analyzed as star texts.

Since the publication of Richard Dyer's *Stars* (1979) and *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), the study of stars has become an essential part of film, television, and media studies.[9] As Dyer and others have shown, stars function in various and sometimes contradictory ways. Stars are the products of the culture industry, a marketing tool to sell films, television shows, pop songs, and, in extension, soft drinks, fashion, and other consumer products to a large market. The star image, however, is constructed by both its industrial production as well as its reception and consumption. The construction of the star image can be read as a star text, containing meanings that are not only produced by the actual performances on screen, record, and stage, but also by promotional material, interviews, critical reception, gossip about their private lives in the tabloid press, and fan cultures, including fanzines and websites. As a commodity of production and consumption, the star image contains a wide range of meanings, which can include conflicting values and fantasies. Stars are constructed as being both ordinary, enabling fans to identify with them, and extraordinary, enabling fans to admire them. Although stars are the products of the culture industry (as the reality television program *Pop Idol* or *American Idol*, known in the Netherlands as *Idols*, makes perfectly clear), they need to have an intrinsic individual talent – a star is born, not made – or at least maintain the suggestion that they are naturally talented. The notion that stars used to be ordinary individuals, preferably from a less-privileged social background, with an extraordinary talent just waiting to be discovered, is defined by Richard Dyer as the star myth, one which can be read back in countless star biographies, ranging from Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley to Michael Jackson and Madonna. Dyer explicitly connects this star myth to the American Dream, another myth of meritocracy which is based on the belief that individual success is attainable for anyone, regardless of social background or constraints, as long as one is talented and works hard to achieve his or her goal.[10]

With its exclusive focus on pop stars, most of them successful examples of the American Dream, USA for Africa's "We Are the World" evokes the rhetoric of the star myth, thereby implying that its message of human universalism is based on active individual agency rather than a passive subjection to social

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and political circumstances. "There's a choice we're making," as the stars exclaim, suggesting that even a collective effort is essentially an individual choice. While the presence of American pop stars assured that the charity pop single would reach a wide and global audience, effectively using the stars as marketing tool, their presence also signified individualism and self-reliance, presenting an American interpretation of meritocracy as a universal value. This double function of American stardom is made clear by the opening of the "We Are the World" music video, consisting of an animated globe showing the USA, followed by the signatures of the featured celebrities. These signatures not only convey the capital value of pop stardom (signatures of stars are valuable commodities in their own right), but also stress the individual commitment of each pop star. In this way, the pop stars become ambassadors of American ideology, representing with their star image a globally mediated example of the American star myth. This does not mean, however, that there is no room for ambiguity. Particularly the star images of Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen show that the representation of America and its values can be contradictory, yet reaffirming at the same time.

As the most successful pop artist of that time and as co-composer of "We Are the World," Michael Jackson already stood out among his fellow stars. Both the song and the music video, however, reinforce his special position. While Lionel Richie, his co-composer, sings the opening line, Jackson is the first to sing the song's chorus – by himself. Throughout the music video, all stars who sing solo lines are filmed in close-up, the camera moving horizontally from the face of one pop star to another. When Michael Jackson sings his lines, however, the camera's horizontal movement is temporarily interrupted, as Jackson is introduced by a tilt shot, with the camera moving vertically from the bottom (a close-up of his feet) to the top (a close-up of his face), similar to the conventional way in which the protagonists of classic Hollywood westerns are introduced. As the camera moves over Jackson's body, the trademark elements of his star image are highlighted: his Bass Weejun shoes and the white sequined socks, the matching single white sequined glove, the black and golden jacket, and his carefully made-up face. Almost reduced to an iconic figure, Michael Jackson can easily be recognized as the greatest pop star. "People will know it's me as soon as they see the socks," he allegedly exclaimed. "Try taking footage of Bruce Springsteen's socks and see if anyone knows who they belong to."[11] As the behind-the-scenes documentary reveals, both the vocals as well as the visuals of Michael Jackson's segment were recorded separately, a fact which reinforces his special position within USA for Africa.[12] Right after Jackson's introduction, the camera returns to its horizontal movement with a close-up of Diana Ross, who sings two solo lines before being joined by Jackson. Singing together, "it's

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true, we'll make a better day, just you and me," Jackson and Ross appear in split screen, emphasizing the similarities in both their vocals and facial features.

That "We Are the World" explicitly connects Michael Jackson to Diana Ross is not a coincidence. Back in 1969, as part of the marketing strategy of their record label Motown, Ross was announced to be the one who had discovered the young Michael Jackson and his brothers, the Jackson 5. The special connection between Jackson and Ross continued to develop, as they were joined in the public's mind through the myth that Jackson "really" wanted to become Diana Ross, allegedly altering his face by cosmetic surgery to make himself look more like her.[13] As lead singer of the popular girl group the Supremes in the 1960s and glamorous solo pop star in the 1970s, Diana Ross became an American success story by making a crossover into white American mainstream culture and thereby defying the racial barriers that kept African-American artists from broad popular acceptance.[14] As several scholars have pointed out, Michael Jackson took Ross's crossover strategy a step further by not just making a crossover into white mainstream culture, but by becoming the greatest American pop star of his times, showing that, in spite of racial boundaries, an African-American man could become a major American mainstream pop star.[15] During the mid-1980s, the powerful image of Michael Jackson and Diana Ross together was synonymous with black achievement. "Diana and Michael: They are the undisputed king and queen of entertainment," announced the African-American magazine *Ebony* in November 1983, proudly featuring a picture of the two stars on its cover.[16]

The second USA for Africa singer that stands out is American rock star Bruce Springsteen. While Jackson is the first to sing the song's chorus as solo, Springsteen is the second. Producer Quincy Jones had asked Springsteen to sing his solo as if he was "a cheerleader of the chorus," notes David Breskin, who, as reporter of *Life* magazine, attended the recording session. "Springsteen sticks his sheet music in his back jeans pocket. His voice is rough, pained, reduced to the essence – perfect for this part."[17] Breskin's description – "rough, pained, reduced to the essence" – fits the oft-made comment that Bruce Springsteen adds a rock sensibility to "We Are the World," thereby providing a sense of authenticity often associated with rock music to the alleged artificiality of pop. Following the bubbly vocals of Al Jarreau, Springsteen literally breaks into the song, both vocally and visually, by stepping into the frame from the background, singing "we are the world, we are the children" with a raspy voice, his head tilted backwards, and his eyes closed. Once the high-pitched pop vocals of Kenny Loggins take over, the rock moment has passed, only to return again at nearly the end of the song. For almost a minute of the song's seven minutes, Springsteen's solo recording of the chorus is pasted together with Stevie Won-

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der's, resulting in a duet, with their voices alternating and echoing each other's lines. The clear distinction between the raspy rock voice of Springsteen and Wonder's soulful vocals is repeated in the visual, as they are presented in split screen. While the split screen of Michael Jackson and Diana Ross emphasizes the similarities between the two singers, the split screen of Bruce Springsteen and Stevie Wonder places Springsteen's white rock in juxtaposition to Wonder's black soul. Moreover, the face of Springsteen is presented in extreme close-up, filling the left side of the screen with whiteness, thereby suggesting that Springsteen not only represents the rock sensibility, but also white American culture in general. As a result, the rigid distinction between whiteness and blackness seems to symbolize the united effort of USA for Africa, showing that white and black can work together to achieve a common goal.

Here the difference between the star images of Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen comes to the foreground. In the academic literature, Jackson tends to be perceived as a performer who challenges the boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality.[18] Kobena Mercer, for example, argues that "neither child nor adult, nor clearly either black or white, and with an androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine, Jackson's star image is a 'social hieroglyph' as Marx said of the commodity form, which demands, yet defies, decoding."[19] The star image of Bruce Springsteen, on the contrary, tends to be perceived as reinforcing the boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality. Comparing him to Ronald Reagan and Rambo, Bryan Garman suggests that "the apparently working-class Springsteen was for many Americans a white hard-body hero whose masculinity confirmed the values of patriarchy and patriotism, the work ethic and rugged individualism, and who clearly demarcated the boundaries between men and women, black and white, heterosexual and homosexual."[20] Applied to "We Are the World," Jackson embodies the crossover American Dream, presenting America as a land where individuals can make their dreams come true regardless of their social, racial, or gendered backgrounds, while Springsteen embodies a nostalgic America, based on traditional values, or, as Gareth Palmer has stated, "Springsteen's America is a conservative land where the [white male] heroes struggle to understand the limits of their horizons but can see little beyond them."[21]

Whether Bruce Springsteen's embodiment of a nostalgic America should be perceived as a sign of patriotism or instead as a criticism of the nation-state USA has been a topic of heated debate among fans, rock journalists, and academic scholars, revealing the ambiguity of his star image. Particularly his album *Born in the USA* could be misinterpreted as a tribute to the nation-state USA. Although most lyrics of the album's songs are critical of the social, economic, and political situation in 1980s America, *Born in the USA* presents

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Bruce Springsteen as a relic of Americana, using the red-white-and-blue signs of the American flag, blue jeans, baseball, and the hometown to evoke a nostalgic image of those "glory days" in small-town America. The album's promotional photographs show him posing in front of an enormous American flag (reminiscent of the famous image of General Patton), wearing the "uniform" of the white working-class male: tight-fitting blue jeans and white T-shirt, showing off his muscular biceps. The *Born in the USA* album cover features a close-up of his backside in blue jeans, with a red baseball cap nonchalantly dangling from his right back pocket. This imagery of Americana, including the American flag as backdrop, was repeated in the live performances of Springsteen's *Born in the USA* world tour of 1984-1985.[22] The album's title song, "Born in the USA," contains a similar ambiguity. While the song's verses tell the grim story of an unemployed Vietnam veteran, the chorus consists of a patriotic chant of the song's title, raising the question of how the song should be interpreted. "Was the song part of a patriotic revival or a tale of working-class betrayal? A symptom of Reagan's America or antidote to it? Protest song or national anthem?"[23] As is often the case with up-tempo rock songs, the music tends to overpower the lyrics. That many youngsters (including myself as a teenager back in 1984) perceived "Born in the USA" as a celebration of America rather than a critical commentary is therefore not surprising.[24]

One year before the recording of USA for Africa's "We Are the World," the star images of both Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen were appropriated by the administration of President Ronald Reagan. On May 14, 1984, Jackson visited the White House to receive an award as part of the National Campaign Against Teenage Drunk Driving, which used the music of his hit song "Beat It" in one of its public service announcements. The highly publicized ceremony consisted of President Reagan honoring "one of the most talented, most popular, and most exciting superstars in the music world today," praising Jackson's "years of hard work, energy, tireless dedication, and a wealth of talent that keeps on growing," and concluding that his "success is an American dream come true."[25] That he was invited to attend a racially "neutral" occasion rather than a specific African-American cause (as is often the case with other African-American artists who are invited to the White House) shows that Michael Jackson had come to symbolize a multicultural America and that his star myth transcended racial categories. Four months later, on September 19, President Reagan referred to Bruce Springsteen at a Reagan-Bush presidential elections campaign rally in New Jersey: "America's future rests in a thousand dreams inside your hearts. It rests in the message of hope in songs of a man so many young Americans admire – New Jersey's own, Bruce Springsteen. And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about."[26]

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Unlike Jackson, Bruce Springsteen did not appreciate the presidential endorsement and he publicly distanced himself from the Reagan administration and its conservative policy of Reaganomics. Yet, in spite of his critical stance, Springsteen's ambiguous star image could nonetheless easily be incorporated within President Reagan's patriotic rhetoric.

Although they embody different Americas, both Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen could be turned into symbols of the American Dream, as Reagan's speeches reveal. One can argue that Reagan's political rhetoric consists of hollow words, based on clichés such as "making your dreams come true," one which the president used on both occasions. The rhetoric works, however, because Jackson and Springsteen did make their own dreams come true by becoming superstars, thereby reinforcing the star myth and the American Dream. In that sense, the way the Reagan administration uses the star images of Jackson and Springsteen does not differ from the way USA for Africa uses them. Moreover, the shared optimism based on these myths of meritocracy, together with a shared belief in the promise of a better future, suggests that President Reagan's political rhetoric is actually quite similar to USA for Africa's message of human universalism. That such American rhetoric also befitted the language of global mass advertising will be discussed below.

The Pepsi- and Coca-Colonization of the World

Twenty years after USA for Africa, one of its prominent singers made a startling revelation that quickly spread across the internet. "I remember most of us who were there didn't like the song, but nobody would say so," Billy Joel told *Rolling Stone* magazine. "I think Cyndi Lauper leaned over to me and said, 'It sounds like a Pepsi commercial.' And I didn't disagree."[27] Perhaps Cyndi Lauper did make such a comparison, but Joel also might have read Greil Marcus's frequently cited essay "Number One with a Bullet," originally published in *Artforum* (May 1985). In his essay, Marcus not only argues that "We Are the World" celebrates American pop celebrity instead of addressing the political reality of the African famine, but he also shows that the charity pop single, intentionally or not, is intertwined with the global marketing of American corporations. As Marcus points out, at the time "We Are the World" was being composed, its two songwriters, Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie, were both starring in their own Pepsi commercials: the one of Jackson premiered during the annual television broadcast of the Grammy Awards in 1984 and the one of Richie at the same event a year later. Coincidentally, "We Are the World" does sound like a Pepsi commercial, particularly the oft-repeated line "there's a choice we're

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making," which echoes the 1980s trademarked Pepsi slogan "The Choice of a New Generation." The choice that USA for Africa makes thus may not be a commitment to fight famine in Africa, but rather a preference for Pepsi over its main competitor Coca-Cola. As Marcus writes:

> As pop music, "We Are the World" says less about Ethiopia than it does about Pepsi – and the true result will likely be less that certain Ethiopian individuals will live, or anyway live a little bit longer than they otherwise would have, than that Pepsi will get the catchphrase of its advertising campaign sung for free by Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, Bruce Springsteen, and the rest. But that is only the short-term, subliminal way of looking at it. In the long-view, real-life way of looking at it, in terms of pop geopolitical economics, those Ethiopians who survive may end up not merely alive, but drinking Pepsi instead of Coke.[28]

Marcus's observation becomes even more poignant by the fact that initially the line was "there's a chance we're taking" instead of "there's a choice we're making." As the behind-the-scenes documentary *We Are the World: The Story Behind the Song* shows, the line was changed during the recording of the demo version. Producer Quincy Jones suggested the change: "One thing we don't want to do, especially with this group, is look like we're patting ourselves on our back. So it's really, 'There's a *choice* we're *making*.'"[29] In an ironic twist of fate, the producer's attempt to make the stars of USA for Africa appear less self-indulgent resulted in the endorsement of an American soft drink instead.

Without downplaying the significance of Marcus's observation, the focus on how "We Are the World" seems to promote Pepsi rather than Coca-Cola ignores the fact that, within a global market, both brands signify an imagined America, in uncannily similar ways. Whether "We Are the World" is a commercial for Pepsi or for Coca-Cola is actually irrelevant, as the song shares the American-dominated consumer discourse of both. In its rhetorical and emotional content, for example, USA for Africa's "We Are the World" is quite similar to the popular 1971 "Hilltop" Coca-Cola commercial. This famous commercial features a multiethnic group of smiling youngsters on an Italian hillside, lip-synching to the words of "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing," a hit song by the New Seekers.[30] Like USA for Africa, the commercial promotes a human universalism by suggesting that the world can be taught "to sing in perfect harmony," only to be followed by "I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company." Moreover, "We Are the World" and "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing" share the American value of individualism within a free market economy, as both emphasize the importance of individual agency and also promote human uni-

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versalism through the act of consumption. The only difference seems to be in the explicitness of the message. While, as Greil Marcus has shown, "We Are the World" can only implicitly suggest that Pepsi can make the world a better place, the message of the "Hilltop" Coca-Cola commercial is straightforward: "Coke is what the world wants today."

That the connection between "We Are the World" and the "Hilltop" Coca-Cola commercial is not just an arbitrary association made by myself is shown by the fact that these two pop-cultural artifacts often tend to be confused. A quick internet search produces three random yet relevant examples of the way "We Are the World" is connected to the "Hilltop" Coca-Cola commercial. First, when in 1997 Jane Fonda's husband Ted Turner, founder and former president of the Cable News Network (CNN), announced to CNN's Larry King that he was planning to donate one billion dollars to the United Nations, he motivated his decision by stating: "I love that Coca-Cola commercial where they all, the kids got on the mountaintop and sang, 'We are the World.' I like that."[31] Second, the Australian academic Paul Duncum starts his article on globalization with the statement that "Coca-Cola advertisements with young people from various nations singing 'We are the World' highlight the sense that we are now all interdependent."[32] Third, describing the global aspirations of the 2004 Olympic Games, *National Review* sports columnist Geoffrey Norman exclaimed that "We can all drink a Coca-Cola (or is it a Pepsi?) and sing 'We are the world; we are the people'."[33] These three completely different examples not only show that USA for Africa's message of human universalism has become indistinguishable from the commercial rhetoric of American-style yet globally mediated soft-drink advertising (promoting both Pepsi and Coca-Cola), but also suggest that its American character has indeed come to be perceived as universal, shared across the globe.

"We Are the World" has been compared to Coca-Cola commercials in the academic literature as well. In her book *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, cultural anthropologist Sally Price argues that the rhetoric of Coca-Cola and "We Are the World" expresses an intrinsically western perspective on globalization. As Price shows, Coca-Cola commercials present "a many-shaded sea of faces, all smiling, and united by their human warmth and shared appreciation of the good things in life, including Coke," which is an expression of multicultural and – seemingly – universal happiness that turns out to be remarkably similar to the "brotherly smiles" and "phenotypic diversity" of "We Are the World."[34] The act of presenting such an American-style happy multiculturalism (or "multiculturalism lite") as a universally shared global value is aptly captured by the term Coca-Colonization, a phrase which was initially coined during the 1950s French Coca-Cola debates, used to denounce the growing

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import of American consumer goods that allegedly threatened French national culture.[35] Coca-Colonization not only implies that the process of Americanization is indeed a form of cultural imperialism resulting in a homogeneous global pop culture, but also (and more importantly) that such a process is based on a paternalistic discourse which tends to reduce its global subjects to a state of childlike innocence and pleasure. We are not just the world but, as the chorus of USA for Africa tells us, also its children, who cannot help but love that refreshing taste of Coca-Cola, while saving the world by buying a cheerful pop tune performed by our favorite superstars. I deliberately define "us" – consumers of this Coca-Cola and "We Are the World" rhetoric – as its global subjects, as the not (yet) consuming Ethiopians obviously are not (yet) included within its commercial ideal of human universalism, or, as Sally Price rightfully observes, "The 'equality' accorded to non-Westerners … is not a natural reflection of human equivalence, but rather the result of Western benevolence," of which USA for Africa's "We Are the World" is a telling example.[36]

By labeling the multicultural rhetoric of Coca-Cola and "We Are the World" as an example of Coca-Colonization, I echo the perspective of Americanization as passive cultural imperialism, suggesting that American pop-cultural consumer products that are marketed as universal embodiments of American values like freedom and democracy are passively perceived and consumed as such. Yet, to stay with the example of Coca-Cola, several scholars correctly have pointed out that Coca-Cola does not contain the same symbolic value for all people around the world, but instead is actively appropriated within national and local contexts, its possible meanings changing from place to place and over time.[37] Coca-Cola often is creolized, resulting in hybrid forms, mixed both figuratively (with local myths and superstitions) and literally (with local drinks like rum or beer). Writing from a historical Cold War perspective, Richard Pells addresses the difference between the way Coca-Cola was introduced and received in western Europe, immediately after World War II, and in eastern Europe, after the collapse of communism in 1989. In many western European countries, Coca-Cola was introduced along with the American military presence, symbolizing both the seductiveness of American pop culture as well as the American cultural and economic dominance. In eastern Europe, on the contrary, Coca-Cola tended to be seen as the symbol of western capitalism and economic progress, a welcome alternative to the inefficiency of the Soviet-dominated economies.[38] Recently, the symbolic value of Coca-Cola as the emblem of the capitalist triumph over communism seems to be decreasing in some eastern European countries, or at least that is suggested by the renewed popularity of imitation Coca-Cola brands such as Polo-Cofta in Poland and Kofola in the Czech Republic, both former communist soft drinks that are

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now marketed as trendy nostalgia.[39] A more explicitly anti-American political challenge to Coca-Colonization has been the highly publicized introduction of the "counter-cola" soft drink Mecca-Cola in 2002, a clear case of trying to beat the enemy at his own game, as the Arabic imitation of Coca-Cola not only copies the actual soft drink, but also its global marketing strategies to promote Mecca-Cola's explicit message of anti-capitalist and pro-Palestinian resistance through the act of consumption.[40]

While the significance of the creolization and active appropriation of pop culture on national and local levels should not be underestimated, as the above examples make perfectly clear, the powerful rhetoric of American pop-cultural products such as Coca-Cola and USA for Africa's "We Are the World" on a global level should not be ignored either. The fact that Coca-Cola and similar American consumer products can (and have been) perceived differently around the world, obtaining symbolic values which its manufacturers never intended or considered, does not alter the striking resemblance in the way these products are globally marketed, heavily invested with American values and ideology. Writing about the western European perception of Coca-Cola, Richard Pells has suggested that the ideological implications of the soft drink should not be taken too seriously: "Still, the acceptance of Coca-Cola did not mean that Europeans were becoming more 'Americanized' or that they had abandoned beer and wine. Coke, after all, was a soft drink, not a foreign ideology. One could swallow it without giving up one's cultural loyalties or sense of national identity."[41]

Undoubtedly unintended, with this statement Pells reveals two reasons that can explain the rhetorical strength of Coca-Cola and, in extension, USA for Africa's "We Are the World." First, Coca-Cola effectively functions as a carrier of American values and ideology because it is "just a soft drink," like "We Are the World" is "just a charity pop song" (and Hollywood "just an entertaining movie"). I am not suggesting that these pop-cultural artifacts contain hidden ideologies or disseminate subliminal messages; quite on the contrary, both Coca-Cola and "We Are the World" show that their ideological content is rather obvious. However, that pop-cultural artifacts are being produced, marketed, and consumed as pleasurable experiences just makes it easier to take their ideological content for granted. Second, Coca-Cola effectively functions as a carrier of American values and ideology because it is not presented as "a foreign ideology" (as Pells rightly notes), and indeed does not replace "cultural loyalties or sense[s] of national identity." Instead, and again like "We Are the World," Coca-Cola presents its "foreign" ideology as a universal one, promoting an American interpretation of values like freedom, democracy, and individual agency, all within a free market economy, as the shared values of

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global multiculturalism and human universalism. Ironically, the notion that "we" are not subjecting ourselves passively to the American values promoted by Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and "We Are the World," but instead actively appropriate these pop-cultural products, reinforces rather than undermines the global dominance of the American ideology of freedom and individual agency, as merely the suggestion that "there's a choice we're making" befits its American rhetoric.

USA for America

On April 23, 1985, at a ceremony honoring the American Peace Corps, President Ronald Reagan proudly announced: "Today, every few minutes on the radio, you can hear the stars of rock, soul, and country music who came together as 'USA for Africa,' singing the chorus of 'We Are the World,' America's recent number-one song hit. Every time a record is sold, more money is raised for African famine relief."[42] Reagan failed to mention that "We Are the World" also was an international bestseller, topping the pop charts in many countries outside of the USA. Three weeks earlier, on April 5, Good Friday (emphasizing the song's being a predominantly Christian act of benevolence), USA for Africa had been launched as a worldwide media event, when "We Are the World" premiered simultaneously on more than 5,000 radio stations around the globe. Reagan also failed to mention that "every few minutes on the radio" the world was subjected to an American ideology, promoting freedom, democracy, and individualism, although the American president undoubtedly supported its message, hence his reference to "We Are the World" at a ceremony honoring the American Peace Corps. In addition, by mentioning both the song's omnipresence in the media as well as its commercial success, Reagan revealed that the USA for Africa hit single is most of all a bestselling consumer product, showing that within the capitalist free market economy, even the act of charity can be marketed and sold.

Now almost thirty years after Band Aid, USA for Africa, and Live Aid (the live concert organized by Band Aid's Bob Geldof, broadcast globally on July 13, 1985), not much has changed in the geopolitical situation. Even if the profits of these events have provided some relief to the Ethiopian population back in 1985, no structural solutions have been found to fight – let alone end – famine in Africa.[43] In 2005, Bob Geldof organized Live 8, another worldwide pop concert bringing together superstars to raise western awareness of global inequality. In the meantime, "We Are the World" has become a pop classic which continues to be played on the radio and on music television. During the

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spring of 2006, when I was writing this chapter, I unexpectedly encountered "We Are the World" in different places around Europe, including as background music to my workout at the Gold's Gym in Berlin, at my office at the University of Amsterdam where the song (played on the radio of the construction workers outside) came blasting through the window, and at the airport of Larnaca, Cyprus, where I arrived to attend the European Association for American Studies conference. Listening to the song in these different contexts made me realize that its original message about Africa has disappeared. "We Are the World" has been reduced to a golden oldie, one of those relentlessly repeated classic pop songs that evoke feelings of nostalgia to the times when they were hits. However, its message of global multiculturalism and human universalism is still present, even though its constant repetition has made "We Are the World" even more clichéd than it was back in 1985.

That ultimately USA for Africa is not about Africa but instead celebrates "America" – both the nation-state USA as well as an imagined America – as the embodiment of multiculturalism and human universalism was made obvious on January 17, 1993, when "We Are the World" was performed as the grand finale of the American Reunion concert, in honor of the first inauguration of President Bill Clinton. Produced by USA for Africa's Quincy Jones, the concert starred Ray Charles singing "America the Beautiful," Diana Ross singing "God Bless America," Aretha Franklin singing "Someday We'll All Be Free" and "Respect," and Kathleen Battle singing "We Shall Overcome," the anthem of the civil rights movement. Performed in front of the monumental Lincoln Memorial (a site which not only symbolizes the nation-state USA, but the civil rights movement as well), the concert was a celebration of a multicultural America, as was underlined by the prominent presence of African-American singers and the choice of repertoire.[44] In the same spirit, Diana Ross subsequently led an all-star choir in the singing of "We Are the World." With only a few of the original pop stars present (including Kenny Rogers, James Ingram, and Stevie Wonder), the USA for Africa singers were joined by, among others, Debbie Gibson, Kathleen Battle, Aretha Franklin, Ashford & Simpson, and Michael Bolton. Emphasizing the song's multiculturalism, a few lines were sung in Spanish. Whereas Bruce Springsteen was conspicuously absent, Michael Jackson made a grand entrance at the same moment as in the music video, this time accompanied by a children's choir. At the end of the song, Diana Ross welcomed President Clinton and his family on stage to sing along with the stars: "We are the world, we are the children."

At first glance, the inclusion of USA for Africa's "We Are the World" in the celebration of President Bill Clinton's inauguration seems commonsensical. Being the first president of the baby boom generation, Clinton already was

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associated with American "youth" pop culture, an image which not only had been promoted by him playing the saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, but also by the theme song of his presidential campaign: Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop [Thinking about Tomorrow]." Moreover, after twelve years of Republican conservative politics, the election of the Democratic President Clinton suggested a revival of liberalism and an optimistic future – a multicultural promise reminiscent of "We Are the World" that was captured by Maya Angelou when she read her poem "On the Pulse of the Morning" at the inauguration ceremony. On second thought, however, the inclusion of USA for Africa in an official celebration of a new American president, televised worldwide, is at least problematic. Not only has Africa disappeared from the picture, but, performed within this context, "We Are the World" becomes a patriotic national anthem that promotes imperialism. Hypothetically, if sung to honor any other grand nation (China, France, Germany, Russia), celebrating its leadership by proudly exclaiming that "they" are the world, such a performance could easily be perceived as – potentially dangerous – propaganda. The fact that the song could be performed at President Clinton's inauguration without causing any major concern internationally suggests that USA for Africa's "We Are the World" indeed has come to be accepted globally as being "universal." While the song's performance at the inauguration does celebrate Americanness, its explicit nationalist character is mystified by its implicit universalism.

Conclusion: An American Conception of the World

Even after three decades, USA for Africa's "We Are the World" continues to provide an illustrative example of how Americanization can function on a global level. Rather than transforming the world into another USA, thereby replacing national, local, and regional cultures, American pop culture presents itself, using the commercial rhetoric of advertising, as being universal, while being (to cite Stuart Hall) "essentially an American conception of the world."[45] Whether the global omnipresence of American pop culture is passively consumed, actively appropriated, or even not recognized as being American at all, does not alter the way American pop culture promotes its American conception of the world as an assumed self-evident ideal of human universalism. To recognize its American character remains significant not so much to prove its Americanness, but instead to challenge its claim of being universal, as the human universalism presented by American pop-cultural artifacts such as Coca-Cola and "We Are the World" tends to depoliticize global politics by reducing social-economic and political issues (like famine and poverty in Africa) to a personal

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matter of individual choice. As I have suggested, USA for Africa's "We Are the World" does so in three ways. First, in contrast to Band Aid's "Do They Know It's Christmas?," USA for Africa presents a happy world of global multiculturalism, in which "we" are all equal and united by diversity, rather than being divided by global inequality. Second, by its exclusive focus on American superstars, USA for Africa invests its ideal of global human universalism with the star myth and the American Dream, both based on a belief in meritocracy which promotes individual agency and self-reliance. Third, USA for Africa's message of global multiculturalism and human universalism is presented using the commercial rhetoric of mass advertising, similar to Pepsi and especially Coca-Cola commercials, thereby not only turning the act of benevolence into an act of consumption, but also suggesting that world citizenship can be reduced to global consumerism within a free market economy. Here I should emphasize that "We Are the World" does present a conception rather than a construction of the world, one which can be contested, resisted, or interpreted differently. Its power, however, rests in its being a highly entertaining, star-studded, and pleasurable pop song, which has been broadcast repeatedly around the globe and which fits within a broader American-style commercial discourse that tends to dominate in the processes of Americanization and globalization.

The double bind of Americanness and self-acclaimed universalism makes USA for Africa's "We Are the World" exemplary of the American dominance in global pop culture. American pop culture has the capacity to be produced, sold, and consumed as being universal, assumed to represent the human experience in general without being culturally specific or bound by national geography, even when, and often especially when, its Americanness is made explicit. Referring to Hollywood cinema, Thomas Elsaesser has called this capacity "an engine of global hegemony," claiming not only that Hollywood successfully presents the American conceptions of freedom, democracy, and a free market economy as universal values, but also that these values "have, until the end of the last century, been widely endorsed and aspired to by people who neither share territorial proximity with the United States nor language, faith, customs, or a common history."[46] As I have suggested with this chapter, the same can be said about American pop culture at large. USA for Africa's "We Are the World" is of course merely a small part of this engine of global hegemony, but as long as we uncritically sing along with the cheery pop tune every time it's played on the radio, eventually we may find "our" world reduced to its American commercial conception.

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